

Good Morning Chairman Nofs and members of the committee.

My name is Laurie Sauer and I am the Director of Region 9 Area Agency on Aging. I represent twelve counties of northeast Michigan (Alcona, Alpena, Arenac, Cheboygan, Crawford, Iosco, Montmorency, Ogemaw, Oscoda, Otsego, Presque Isle and Roscommon). We are a very rural area of the state and I am greatly concerned about the implications of SB 636 for older adults, which will transition landline telephone service in three years to Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) service.

There is a lot to be said for embracing technology and at face value this bill presents some points worthwhile to consider. Better networks, faster, more efficient and affordable service are some of the promises. In cities and densely populated areas these things may be plausible; however, the reality is that ensuring consistently affordable and reliable telephone service through VoIP in rural areas is yet to be demonstrated as feasible. For example, cell phone service in northern Michigan is spotty at best. If you have never travelled the roads in northern Michigan, you may not understand my statement here, so for illustrative purposes let me offer that on a well-travelled major road on my journey here last night (M-33) my calls were dropped many times before I finally gave up. This is not an unusual occurrence. It happens frequently and throughout the region. In many areas, there is no cell service at all. In fact, I am not able to access cell service at my home, which is only eight miles out of town. Without a landline, I would have no telephone access to friends and family, doctors, 911 or other emergency services.

I do have internet service, though. Therefore, one could surmise VoIP would be an option for me instead of a landline or even a cell phone. My service is through a satellite company. Again, internet service through a cell phone provider is not an option though it is widely advertised as such, nor is service through a cable provider possible because they will not run cable a mile down my road to reach my house. The satellite service is great....on a clear day. On a windy day, service is hit or miss. In the winter months, power goes out frequently and so does the satellite service because there is no electricity to run the computer. However, with a landline I can call my utility company to tell them I have no electric service and they will send a crew. If I have an emergency, I can still call 911 and they will be able to identify my location through the Public Safety Answering Point if I am unable to communicate. With VoIP, no power means no telephone service, no access to 911, no access to electrical or heating utilities, no access to call family or friends to tell them I'm freezing and without power.

Imagine that same scenario for an older adult on oxygen, or using an electronic medication dispenser to keep them on track with their 15 or 20 medicines, or using a heart monitor, or having a medical emergency and no phone to call for help. Maybe the phone will work, but because it's VoIP, 911 won't be able to easily identify the person's location if they can't speak. It can be a life or death situation. In rural towns like mine and for those who live in isolated areas, this is the reality. Landlines are a lifeline and until there is certainty that VoIP is more reliable and accessible, this legislation should not be passed. Technology is great when it works, but right now VoIP is not ready for prime time across the state. Please ensure the safety of older Michiganians by delaying this legislation until comparable, reliable service is available for all.

Thank you for your time.

Laurie Sauer
Region 9 Area Agency on Aging
2375 Gordon Rd.
Alpena, MI 49707
(989) 356-3474 ext. 263